INTRO DRAFT #1

Special education in public schools in the United States is closely guided by a piece of federal legislation known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the latest update being done in 2006. Central to this statute is the concept of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), which states that: “To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled, and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.” (IDEA 2006, TITLE I / B / 612 / a / 5)

In essence, the law states that a child with a disability must be educated in an environment as close to that as their nondisabled peers as possible. For some children, this means participating in what would be termed a general education class, or the typical classroom with a few supports as possible. For others the LRE may be a special session with a special education teacher outside of general class time. For still others the LRE may mean placement in a separate classroom or separate school, due to the nature or severity of their disabilities. This arc of services from least restrictive to most restrictive is termed the “continuum of placement”, which exists in order to ensure that a team of professionals considers the child’s needs fully when deciding in which setting a child will be educated. In principle, a team must consider a host of options from a general education class with no supplementary supports, on along the continuum before choosing to educate the child in a highly restrictive setting such as a separate school.

The most important tool in the special education profession is the child’s Individual Education Plan (IEP). This plan is an extensive document which summarizes the child’s abilities and needs, provides evidence of the team’s decision on placement and necessary support services which would ensure the child’s success in school. The IEP must be reviewed at a minimum of once every calendar year to determine placement and support services. Before changing placement, an IEP team must meet and discuss the child’s progress and needs, and then determine if the child needs a more restrictive or less restrictive placement.

This begs a number of questions, based on a child’s receiving supports and an appropriate education. Should not a child then move progressively less restrictive setting over time? When students are placed in more restrictive environments, do they in fact move to less restrictive environments?

In order to address these questions, the authors became interested in knowing what the rate of mobility from more restrictive to less restrictive environments was, and what student supports facilitated (and conversely, what lack thereof may prevent) the transition to a less restrictive environment. This research project focused on students attending the most restrictive public school environments for students with social/emotional disabilities in three special education cooperatives, SEDOL, NSSED and NTDSE.